

Is a Sustainable Adirondack Park a Pipe Dream?

An interview with Dr. Ross Whaley

By GRAHAM COX

Dr. Ross Whaley is former president of the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry. He was chair of the Adirondack Park Agency from 2003 to 2007, and is presently Senior Advisor to the Adirondack Landowners Association. Dr. Whaley is co-author with William Porter and Jon Erickson of a new book soon to be published by Syracuse Uni-

versity Press, The Great Experiment in Conservation: Voices from the Adirondack Park. In May of 2008 Dr. Whaley gave a keynote address to the Adirondack Research Consortium's Annual Conference on the Adirondacks on sustainable development in the Adirondack Park, which prompted these questions from Dr. Graham Cox of Audubon New York.

Cox: We have long held up the Adirondack Park as an example to the rest of the nation and the world of what we mean by sustainable development, but the details of this idea seem to elude us. We have also heard it expressed that if we cannot make sustainability work here then it probably will not work elsewhere.

Whaley: Let me give you my notion of what sustainable development means here. To me it is not an unattainable abstract notion, but a specific and potentially attainable set of goals. (1) Protect the ecological integrity of the public lands, the Forest Preserve; (2) perpetuate a smooth transition from the public lands to the private, to prevent public beautiful here and private ugly there; (3) protect the quality of the water; (4) promote economic development that neither destroys nor impoverishes the natural resources on which that or other economic development depends; (5) promote a sense of community and pride in the place I live—its aesthetics, its schools, churches, my neighbors; and (6) find a shared vision for the Park. These ideas lay the foundation for all that follows when we think about a sustainable Adirondack Park. These six conditions for sustainable development look

inward to ideas over which we might have some influence, and therefore are critical to the notion of *working together*, which was the theme of our ARC conference in May.

Cox: You characterize these ideas as looking inward, but the Park is part of a bigger whole—part of New York State, part of the Northern Forest, part of the USA and we also have a global context. How does this bigger whole affect the sustainability of the Park?

Whaley: We must not forget the global context in which we will be working together. Or, as we explore this further, maybe even the *we* will change. I have increasingly come to believe that it is events outside our traditional borders that impact us more than events within our borders. The Park is influenced by what happens in the state. The state is more influenced by national events than state events, and the nation is influenced more by global decisions and actions than anything done by the Congress or Executive branches of government. Therefore, if one is to look forward a decade or so, we must be careful not to simply project a continuation of local trends established during the last decade. That is, for example, will cell phone service, grooming for snowmobiles, increases in acreage of Forest Preserve, fire towers, or the decrease in school-age children continue to be central issues facing the Park or the Park Agency? By 2020 the United States will have added another 34 million people—another New York and Florida. The world will have increased by another billion—an-

other India. If recent trends continue, the global economy may more than double, but not necessarily here. Globalization will have continued to broaden because it will be to the benefit of transnational firms, and their stockholders, and the pensioners whose future welfare is tied to the success of those industries.

Cox: Yes, but what do a global economy and globalization have to do with us here in the Park? Are we not a relatively self-contained and relatively empty area? Our forests and mountains and lakes are an attraction for winter and summer tourism and recreation but aren't the schools losing their students, aren't year-round, good paying jobs hard to find, are businesses shunning the Park because of what they perceive as too-strict APA regulations?

Whaley: I have repeatedly said about globalization, we still don't get it! We address globalization as if the central issue is turning up or down the spigot of international trade. What is foreign-made, anyway? Is it where the product was assembled? My Toyota was assembled in the United States. Or is it where the parts come from? Or is 'foreign' where the corporate headquarters is located? Or is it where the bank is located that lent the money to build the plant? Or is it where the stockholders live? You ask: What does this have to do with the Adirondacks? If we truly live in a global economy, then the implications of global prosperity or global scarcity may have profound impacts on the Adirondacks. As Jon Erickson continually reminds me, while the Adirondacks may be blessed

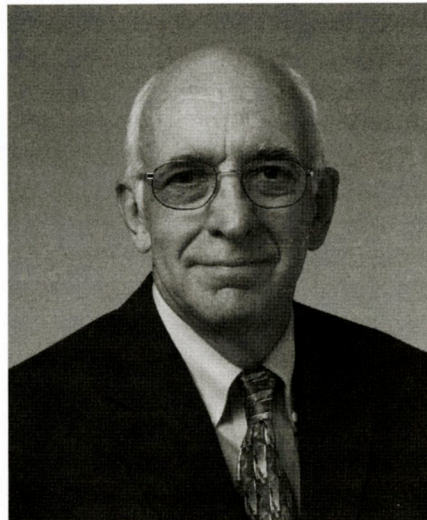
Graham Cox coordinates land use and forest programs for Audubon New York, is completing a sustainable community research project in the Northern Forest and researching development trends and patterns in the Lake George watershed. He may be reached at gcox@audubon.org.

with abundant open space and natural resources (an *empty world* from an economic growth perspective), the rest of the world is approaching or, some would argue, has reached being a *full world* as measured by the availability of natural resources relative to the demand being put on them and the ability to absorb the waste products that we generate in our quest to meet the apparently insatiable demand for goods. Thus globalization will impact the Adirondacks in at least three ways. Elementary physics would suggest that the full world will try to fill the void in the empty world next too it. The future second-home owners may as likely be from Asia or the Middle East as from New Jersey. And lastly, when broadband communication is available throughout the Park, we may see something like a firm in North Creek processing the medical records for a medical center in Berlin.

Cox: You are saying that this full world will move quickly to fill the void, the relatively empty spaces like the Adirondack Park? Surely we are approaching the limits as to how many people can live or recreate in the Park without destroying the resources we have here.

Whaley: I have been intrigued by the notion of carrying capacity, especially the global carrying capacity. In 1995 Joel Cohen attempted an answer in his book *How Many People Can the Earth Support?* In it there is a chart that plots various estimates of the global carrying capacity over time starting well over one hundred years ago. This chart fascinated me because as you move toward the present day the number of people turning attention to this question has increased and thus the number of estimates increases. But with more estimates the range between the optimists and pessimists also increases. Either the question is intractable or we are simply getting dumber and dumber. Whether we have surpassed the global carrying capacity as Mathias Wackernagel concluded in his *Ecological Footprint* or we are approaching it, the impacts will be felt in the Adirondacks in little ways and big. For example, prop-

erty prices in the Tupper Lake area will not just be driven up by outsiders from New York City or Trenton, New Jersey, but also from Milan, Beijing, Kyoto, or Dubai. And while those of us who cannot imagine technological change in the next couple of decades being as great as in the past couple, those who forecast technological change indicate that the rate of change will even be greater. High speed access to the internet will be common in the Adirondacks and, therefore,



Dr. Ross Whaley

high speed communication with the rest of the world, and in ways we haven't yet anticipated. Some people will find their recreation pleasure in the virtual world, but many others will crave to recreate and live in that place where the real natural world remains. Equally important will be the changes in the non-tourist economy. Why not move my small business here? If I have instant communication with the rest of the world, I have a competitive advantage of attracting employees because of the surrounding amenities, the crime rate is low, wage rates are below average for comparable businesses, and the regulatory environment suggests that the Park may be protected from the kind of sprawl the rest of the country is witnessing. Of course, it is not all a bed of roses; housing costs are high and so are property taxes. It is an interesting exercise to try to refine a picture of the future that the Park and its citizens will encounter.

Cox: We have been arguing about the carrying capacity of the Park for many years. Indeed a major premise of the Adirondack Park Agency Act seems to rest on this idea, and it also rests on the idea of the balance between environmental and economic interests. How do we settle the carrying capacity question and agree on what this balance should be?

Whaley: As Porter, Erickson and I conclude in our forthcoming book on the Adirondacks, the ability to deal with the increasing pressures of a *full world* from a policy standpoint is a question of the allocation of property rights. What is the balance, for example, between short-run motives of the private sector and public intervention—by the state—in retaining property rights in order to protect the social good from the former? What is the appropriate measure in property rights for the government—again the state—intruding in a way that stifles the technological and management innovation that we have seen exhibited by the private sector? The Adirondack Park has been the greatest conservation experiment in the world dealing with that very question. The creation of the Forest Preserve, Article 14 of the State's Constitution, the Adirondack Park Agency, and experiments with conservation easements are all examples of our quest to get the allocation of property rights correct. But the challenge will increase if we are to become that model of sustainable development to which some of us aspire.

Cox: Have we reached the limits of this conservation experiment? Has the state gone as far as it can in this balancing act of property rights between the public and private sectors?

Whaley: I would argue that the potential for meeting our sustainable development goals calls for a continuation of our bold conservation experiment, but with a new emphasis. The boldness of the old emphasis was in the visionary policies that came out of dealing with the allocation of property rights in ways that on occasion were refined and emulated elsewhere, but often were rejected

because there were not the political guts to risk immediate short-term gains for significant or perhaps necessary long-term benefits. That is, by the way, one of the roles of government. The new emphasis will be on refinement of the implementation of policies that come from research and better information. Several years ago, Ray Curran, Steve Erman and I struggled with the notion of research needs for improved decision making in the Park, and I quote from those comments:

The role of the Park Agency in achieving this objective is principally, though not exclusively, regulatory. Fundamentally, government regulation involves limiting some individual's or group's freedom for the protection of the public good (aka allocation of property rights). This tradeoff is a heavy responsibility and can most appropriately be evaluated when the evidence for the protection of the public good is grounded in scientifically verifiable information rather than personal opinion, or left to conservative vis-à-vis liberal political persuasions. Not only is it appropriate, but some decisions may be indefensible (legally) if not based on good science.

The Adirondack Park Agency Act directs the agency to not approve projects coming under its jurisdiction unless it determines "the project would not have an *undue adverse impact* upon the natural, scenic, aesthetic, ecological, wildlife, historic, recreational, or open space resources of the park . . . taking into account the commercial, industrial, residential, recreational or other benefits that might be derived from the project" (Section 809:9 APA Act). Therefore, there is research of two kinds, (1) cause and effect (i.e. undue adverse impact) and (2) tradeoffs (taking into account . . . benefits) implicit by the mandate of the Act.

Today, I would add one other item to the cause and effect and tradeoff kinds of research, and that is research dealing with accommodation to impacts imposed from afar and beyond our direct control.

Cox: What kinds of research questions are you suggesting?

Whaley: I will limit myself to one example from each kind of research starting with the third idea first, *accommodation to impacts imposed from afar*. While I am gratified with the current attention to climate change, I am intrigued by what we don't know. Will the change be gradual like a rheostat or will there be a trigger that causes more abrupt change in global warming? And how does that impact the way we accommodate to it? Consequently will the ecological impacts be more gradual or abrupt? It seems nonsensical to me that one intact ecosystem (say a predominantly deciduous forest ecosystem composed of birch, beech and maple) will be replaced by another intact ecosystem (say an oak hickory ecosystem) as is often stated. Why do we talk about the impacts of climate change at one conference, but go to another one to talk about invasive species? Are these not likely to be related? Are not the most logical vectors for ecological change going to be insects and diseases? Which ones?

Research related to *cause and effect* was that which I craved for during my days with the Park Agency. For every proposed development the critics would throw out warnings that were substantive in concept but elusive in empirical evidence as to magnitude. I could spend hours on this subject alone, but will limit myself to mentioning three terms I claim to understand, but which are slippery in a regulatory context—fragmentation, carrying capacity, and cumulative impact. These are fundamental to understanding maintaining the ecological integrity of public lands, a smooth transition between public and private lands, and economic activity that neither destroys nor impoverishes the natural resources on which it depends. These are among my conditions for a sustainable Park we talked about at the beginning.

Finally, in regards to the research on *tradeoffs*, I am still confused over the economic consequences of second-home development. Maybe second homes use resources that might better serve another purpose. Certainly, the demand for land,

materials, and labor created by second homes increases the price of these inputs, but what are the distributional consequences of those price increases? Who benefits? Who loses? Certainly, the dynamics of a community will change with second-home ownership, but would there be a WILD Center in Tupper Lake without the financial and volunteer support of second-home owners? Please, don't interpret these questions as a personal promotion for second homes as a key to economic development in the Park. Rather, I am asking for inquiry into the tradeoffs so that I can have a better informed notion of sustainable economic development in light of both local and global insights as to what is beneficial in the short run, sustainable in the long run, and reversible if I make a big mistake.

Cox: There is a growing understanding by all interests involved in the Park today that we should revisit the APA Act, especially in light of the new and big issues of defining sustainable development and likely climate change impacts. Do you think that a rewritten APA Act is needed or can we live with it and still deal with these bigger issues?

Whaley: In my opinion, the challenges facing the Park are changing, and therefore there is need to continuously examine and refine the policies and regulations used by the Park Agency. I am not convinced, however, that it would be worth the controversy to open the Act to wholesale revision. Citizens of all persuasions are starting to collaborate more on the future of the Park. I am concerned that if we opened the Act or the State Land Master Plan for major revisions the conflicts of old would once again fester and would move us away from the last plank in my notion of a sustainable Park, "a shared vision."

Cox: Thank you, Dr. Whaley, for putting these ideas of a sustainable Adirondack Park in this broader global and economic context. We look forward to reading the forthcoming book and appreciating the details of your argument.